



CAMPAIGN TO STOP KILLER ROBOTS

Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security

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Thank you Mr. Chair.

I am the Silicon Valley Lead for the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, the rapidly growing coalition of more than 130 non-governmental organizations in 60 countries working to preemptively ban fully autonomous weapons, also known as lethal autonomous weapons systems.

It's clear that the increasing technological capacity for autonomy in weapons systems is raising a host of fundamental ethical, moral, legal, accountability and security concerns. Weapons systems that select and engage targets without meaningful human control would cross the threshold of acceptability and must be prohibited.

To ensure such problematic technology does not escape regulation, the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots calls on states to launch negotiations on a treaty to preserve meaningful human control over the use of force. Such a treaty should apply to the range of weapons systems that select and engage targets on the basis of sensor inputs, that is, systems where the object to be attacked is determined by sensors rather than by humans; it should prohibit systems that would not allow meaningful human control; and it should establish positive obligations to ensure that other systems are appropriately constrained.

The goal of establishing limits to deal with the killer robots threat is one that is now widely shared by many states, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and non-governmental organizations. Demands for a new treaty to ban killer robots have the firm support of the technology sector, including dozens of companies and thousands of artificial intelligence experts, roboticists, scientists and tech workers. I hear these concerns every day in my work, and people are eager to find ways to support our shared goal of banning autonomous weapons.

Here at this 74th session of the UN General Assembly, we again see strong agreement that retaining meaningful human control over the use of force is a humanitarian priority, legal necessity and an ethical obligation.

This can be seen in the way in which the foreign ministers of France, Germany and other nations participating in the Alliance for Multilateralism initiative identified the killer robots threat along with climate change and four other issues of international concern as deserving of an urgent multilateral response.

The same goal, of ‘developing a normative framework’ on this issue, is also found in the draft report of the 2019 meetings of the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) Group of Governmental Experts. However, in the face of persistent opposition from Russia, it is far from clear if such an objective can be endorsed at the CCW’s annual meeting in Geneva next month.

This is not due to a lack of constructive engagement on the part of the great majority of countries that have participated in the CCW meetings on this topic since 2014. The CCW has been building a shared understanding on this issue – but struggles to agree on credible recommendations for multilateral action due to the objections of a handful of military powers, most notably Russia and the United States. Yet again, a few states can abuse a concept of ‘consensus’ to curb the ambition of a majority of the participating states, preventing a more focused mandate that would produce a more focused conversation.

It’s time to begin charting a new pathway forward. Commitments to vague ‘normative frameworks’ and additional ‘guiding principles’ are a form of diplomatic treading water. An effective legal instrument is both achievable and necessary on this issue.

Mr. Chair, at this First Committee, we hear a lot of talk about the need for strong multilateral action to safeguard and strengthen the rules-based international order that governs this planet. We concur, but we want to see legislative action not just more empty rhetoric.

States that want to ensure meaningful human control over the use of force should speak in favour of negotiations to address this issue through a legal instrument. This is the normative framework that’s needed to future proof humanity from this serious threat. We stand ready to work with all states that are committed to achieve this goal.

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